

Southampton City-wide public sector strike

Nick Chaffey

Like many cities, this week Southampton was covered by picket lines at colleges, universities and civil service offices. 75% of schools were shut or severely affected by the strike. In addition selective action at the council continued with refuse workers, street cleaners, toll bridge workers and librarians all out on strike.

By lunchtime the 11am rally of over 500 teachers, lecturers and civil servants was swelled to well over 1,000 as hundreds of council workers marched into the Guildhall Square. It combined to create an electric mood of anger and growing determination to defend pay, jobs, pensions and services.

Reflecting the importance of the council dispute, with the threat of workers being locked out on 11 July, Unison general secretary Dave Prentis gave a fiery speech attacking the government and pointing the way forward: "There is an alternative, if the bankers caused this crisis, they should pay." And, "if the attack on pensions continues, there should be five million out by the autumn."

Ian Woodland, Unite officer, whose members face dismissal on 11 July if they refuse to sign up to new, worse contracts, said: "Our campaign will continue, come what may."

Earlier in the day Socialist Party members had visited picket lines



On a strike demo in June photo Paul Mattsson

across the city to give support and solidarity. Civil service union PCS members at HMRC and the Home Office reported strong support for action and were in a buoyant mood. UCU members at Tauntons College said the strike had been well supported and the college was closed.

At the rally the Socialist Party's call for a one-day public sector strike was supported overwhelm-

ingly. Our stall had a steady stream of people coming up to sign our petition with a number of teachers and young workers filling in 'join' cards.

This is a glimpse of what is coming.

In Southampton, with the threat of mass sackings at the council, events are coming to a head. It is vital any lockout is met with an escalation of the strike action. This should include a council-wide strike the day

of the next full council meeting on 13 July. This should be followed with an all-out strike if the council carries through their sackings.

Public support for the strike is strong despite rubbish piled high across the city. This should be mobilised in a mass weekend demonstration with an appeal to workers and the trade unions across the region.

The campaign would be given a boost if the Southampton Labour group gave full support to the strike and pledged to reverse all Tory cuts if elected to run the council next May. Southampton Socialist Party continues to give its full and active support to striking council workers. This is the time for bold and resolute action that could see an important victory in the growing battles in council offices across the country.

Update - action escalates

A mass meeting on 4 July agreed to escalate the action. From 11 July nearly 500 more council workers will be on strike, Unite and Unison members. This includes 13 Port Health Officers, which has the potential to bring one of the busiest ports in the country to a halt. The City will lose an estimated £1 million for every day the port is idle.

• **On 13 July there will be a mass demonstration of council workers to the council meeting.**

• **Assemble 1pm in East/Andrews Park, for a march to the Civic Centre.**

In brief

No to McNulty



photo Paul Mattsson

The annual meeting of rail union RMT has endorsed plans for a massive national campaign, including a cross-industry strike ballot if necessary, to resist any attempts by the government to roll out its McNulty Rail Review assault on Britain's railways.

The RMT warns that McNulty would mean, among other things: pay freezes and longer hours, inferior conditions for new entrants, driver only operation, reduced safety standards and increased fares. RMT has vowed to work with other unions, passenger groups, politicians and local communities to build a mass campaign of national resistance to McNulty. RMT general secretary Bob Crow said: "...we will be building a mass, national campaign against this all-out assault on our railways that will leave no stone unturned in the fight to stop us being dragged back to the days of Railtrack, Hatfield and Potters Bar while the private companies are locked into gold-plated deals that leave them laughing all the way to the bank."

Uni strike

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at London Southbank University (LSBU) were on strike on 29 June. Rob Williams, NSSN chair, spoke to the pickets. "The dispute is over the university management's decision to take LSBU out of national pay bargaining with the clear intention to attack pay and terms and conditions. As part of this, management have refused to honour the national pay settlement for 2009-10, the princely rate of 0.5%! This shows how determined management are. "UCU members are also concerned that this is just the start and will also include attempts to bring in performance-related pay which will mean going from national pay agreements to local and even individual contracts which will undermine the union and staff unity." All the lecturers also supported the 30 June strike, with many of them attending the London city-centre rally.

Greenwich cuts

The Unite trade union in Greenwich, south London has made a plea to MPs and councillors to halt the proposed transfer of the highly valued welfare rights service to a trading company.

If allowed to go ahead borough residents and advisers may no longer have access to a specialist local service as the union fears that the transfer will eventually lead to the end of the service. The company has already cut jobs, pay and conditions following transfers to the company of other council services.

Unite branch secretary Onay Kasab stated: "...welfare rights is not a "trading" organisation, nor can it be. It does not raise a profit, it raises money for residents.. This proposal is bad news for the council, bad news for staff and bad news for residents".

Birmingham - the fightback begins

Tom Creek

Birmingham Socialist Party

In Birmingham on 30 June, striking teachers, lecturers and civil servants were joined by thousands of local government workers who are fighting brutal attacks on their terms and conditions. The strike rally in the city centre brought together 5,000 workers in defiance of the Con-Dem cuts.

271 schools were affected by the strikes. 31 libraries, 20 neighbourhood offices, three leisure centres, four Connexions offices and four adult day centres were closed completely. There was disruption across other council services and in many universities and colleges, and numerous jobcentres and Department for Work and Pensions offices were

also closed or disrupted.

Last year, all 26,000 council workers were threatened with redundancy unless they accepted reduced terms and conditions. The imposed deal was nicknamed the 'Martini contract' because it will force employees to work 'anytime, anyplace, anywhere'.

This is combined with the removal of allowances for working overtime and weekends, which will have a devastating effect on low-paid workers in areas such as social care and refuse collection, where anti-social hours are the norm. Many workers face losing a third of their salary, and with it their houses.

Overall the mood was defiant and determined. Caroline Johnson, a senior Birmingham Unison official, described 30 June as: "the first day of continuing action", and

workers agreed that it was just the beginning.

There was strong support amongst pickets for the Socialist Party's call for a 24-hour public sector general strike in the autumn, which would draw in other unions like Unite, Unison and the GMB on a national scale.

The question of political representation must also be addressed. The Labour Party was notable by its absence from the picket lines and the demonstration, and Labour has shown no indication that it is prepared to fight the cuts in Birmingham.

It is likely to control the council after the elections next May, so it will be essential to build a socialist political alternative in the city to fight all cuts and show a socialist route out of the capitalist crisis.

Leeds Unison members decisively reject the council's final offer

A Leeds Unison Steward

Leeds Unison members have opposed the council's latest offer by an overwhelming 85% with only 14.5% voting to accept, out of a turnout of 31.3%.

The result and 'return rate' has increased from the previous ballot in February. This follows pressure from activists to commit the leadership to stronger advice to members to reject the offer.

Leeds Unison will not sign a collective agreement to make changes to service conditions. However, members in GMB, Unite and Ucat

unions have voted to accept.

This will complicate the effectiveness of local government unions working collectively. It is likely that the council will impose the offer which will mean all staff being dismissed and re-engaged on new contracts with the changes to our service conditions.

Leeds Unison is committed to seek to ballot for strike action if the council imposes the changes. But it will be pressing to continue negotiations.

Many members have already experienced a deterioration of the quality of service; greater workloads, less staff to do the work, fewer working harder, and that's just through

the Early Leavers Initiative.

Already there has been £90 million-worth of cuts to service budgets so that we offer less to service users and tougher access to potential service users. Sadly there have been some services that have been cut. For many of us these cuts are creeping in on the quiet. The council wants its employees to formally accept what it is already doing.

Leeds Unison must lead by example and be the first to start mobilising its members, preparing for industrial action now. We must make our members aware that these cuts are very real and that all jobs are potentially under threat.

Lock out at Fawley

Protesting outside Gate 1 at the massive Exxon refinery at Fawley, Southampton, 20 locked out fabrication workers began their fight after being sacked without redundancy on 30 June. Their employer PTF Engineering was taken over by Hertel with all workers transferred under TUPE regulations.

Workers were told they had been transferred to Hertel and to turn up for work. When they arrived for work they were told they weren't needed. Sacked with no redundancy, no notice, after years of service.

Sacked workers explained: "We provide 24-hour support for Fawley, with everything on site ready to go. Hertel have no one local to do the work, so who's going to do it?"

In the view of some there, this was "no accident", with Hertel and others seeking to undermine trade union terms and conditions on sites across the UK. This is the latest battleground following recent disputes at Saltend, Staythorpe, Lindsey and elsewhere.

The 20 locked out fabricators continued their protest at Exxon Fawley on 5 July.

PTF workers, armed with leaflets about the dispute, stopped workers driving onto the site. All gave their support. Some said they would come out in support if a picket was put up.

GMB members are now waiting to hear that the dispute has been made official. This will be an important boost to the dispute.

PTF workers are planning to take their fight to Hertel HQ in Middlesbrough and were pleased to hear there is support from ex-Redhall workers who were locked out at Saltend.

• Send messages of support to gary.cook@gmb.org.uk